



# Museums Without Borders

Selected Writings of Robert R. Janes



# MUSEUMS WITHOUT BORDERS

Drawing together nearly 40 years of experience, *Museums without Borders* presents the key works of one of the most respected practitioners and scholars in the field. Through these selected writings, Robert R. Janes demonstrates that museums have a broader role to play in society than is conventionally assumed. He approaches the fundamental questions of why museums exist and what they mean in terms of identity, community, and the future of civil life.

This book consists of four parts: Indigenous Peoples; Managing Change; Social Responsibility; and Activism and Ethics. Ordered chronologically, each begins with an introduction which situates the ensuing papers in their historical and cultural contexts. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines anthropology, ethnography, museum studies, and management theory, Janes both questions and supports mainstream museum practice in a constructive and self-reflective manner, offering readers alternative viewpoints on important issues.

Considering concepts not generally recognized in museum practice, such as the Roman leadership model of *primus inter pares* and the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, Janes argues that the global museum community must examine how they can meet the needs of the planet and its inhabitants. *Museums without Borders* charts the evolving role of the contemporary museum in the face of environmental, societal and ethical challenges, and explores issues that have, and will, continue to shape the museum sector for decades to come.

**Robert R. Janes** is currently an independent scholar who has worked in and around museums for 39 years as an executive, consultant, editor, author, board member, archaeologist, instructor, volunteer, and philanthropist. He lives in Canmore, Alberta, Canada.

# PRAISE FOR THIS BOOK

“Janes is an unafraid original who writes organically from deep in his ethical soul. He energizes us to create museums in their purest, most consequential form, so that they will contribute to the survival of the planet. After reading this book, his urgency will become yours.”

Elaine Heumann Gurian, *The Museum Group, USA*

“This compilation alerts the museum sector to new horizons in its collective conscience. With the blurring of traditional boundaries and the rise of a ‘glocal’ mindset, innovative attention to pressing societal and environmental challenges has become vital. Here, Janes draws on four decades as a scholar-practitioner to deliver a wake-up call for our sector to unleash its toolkit as a force for good in the Anthropocene.”

Emlyn Koster, *Director, North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, USA*

“Janes’ stock-in-trade in his long and varied museum career has been upending the field’s sacred cows and entrenched practices with that rare combination of persistence, rigor, courage and elegance. This collection of his writings over his many years as a scholar-practitioner show the evolution of his own journey and provides an ethical framework that guides those who aspire to take positive action in the world.”

Marjorie Schwarzer, *University of San Francisco, USA*

# MUSEUMS WITHOUT BORDERS

Selected writings of  
Robert R. Janes

*Robert R. Janes*

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**To our ancestors, descendants, and the more-than-human world –  
with the hope and intention that we will not fail you.**

A museum, then, must be an argument with its society. And more than that, it must be a timely argument. A good museum always will direct attention to what is difficult and even painful to contemplate. Therefore, those who strive to create such museums must proceed without assurances that what they do will be appreciated.

Neil Postman

*"Museum as Dialogue"* Museum News, (69), 5, September/October, 1990, p. 58

So what difference did it make that your museum was there? So what would have been the difference had it not been?

Stephen E. Weil

*"Creampuffs and Hardball: Are You Really Worth the Cost?"*

Museum News, September/October, 1994, p. 43

Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul.

Edward Abbey

*A Voice Crying in the Wilderness: Notes from a Secret Journal*  
(*Vox Clamantis in Deserto*) (1989). New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 40



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# FOREWORD

*Richard Sandell*<sup>1</sup>

It was during the late 1990s, carrying out research for a course I was to deliver on museum management at the University of Leicester, that I first came across Robert Janes' work. Over the two decades since that first encounter, Bob (as I have come to know him) – through his books, articles and talks; through opportunities to exchange ideas and to collaborate – has exerted a considerable influence on my own thinking, research and practice. The ideas expressed within his writings, whilst firmly rooted in the particularities of his Canadian experience, have proved to have a remarkably universal appeal – perhaps more so than those of any other writer on museums that I know – and to resonate with my students from all over the world, whatever their professional, cultural, political or disciplinary background. As result of this capacity to engage and challenge, Bob has become a familiar protagonist in innumerable lively classroom debates in Leicester and beyond around the unique role that museums can play in contemporary society.

Given the prominent position that his scholarly output has occupied in much of my professional life, I must admit that I approached this collection of selected writings with the expectation that I would be largely revisiting the familiar. It has been both surprising and rewarding, therefore, to find myself challenged in new ways by *Museums without Borders*, partly by encountering new (previously unpublished) material but, more significantly, by the opportunities afforded by reading across (and drawing out connections within) a remarkably varied body of work that spans nearly four decades.

Despite the variation in theme and content – and the different times in which these arguments were developed – the writings share a quality that makes the reader very aware that they originate from the same mind. This quality stems in part from the author's distinctive writing style (more on this in a moment) but more fundamentally, I would argue, from the influence of an enduring set of values that have undoubtedly shaped a very particular understanding of the museum.

Throughout the writings included here, the values which Bob holds dear – and evidently include a deeply felt concern for the natural world, a profound respect for cultural diversity and an almost intuitive belief in fairness and justice – are ever present and constant, but continually reanimated and brought to bear on the shifting circumstances which museums in a rapidly changing world must engage with and respond to. This values-driven approach produces challenging, but undeniably authentic and credible, ways of understanding the role and purpose of museums that, I would argue, begin to account for the wide appeal of Bob's writings and his capacity to speak to museum practitioners working in very diverse settings.

The writings presented here explore big issues – some of the most important of our time, ranging from the rights of Indigenous peoples to climate change – and encourage the reader to step back from the detail of everyday museum work (for example, the technical concerns of managing, researching and presenting collections) that can often obscure the bigger picture. Despite this unusually ambitious and outward-looking frame, the writings presented here are also imbued with pragmatism; they begin to suggest ways forward that have inspired many in the museum world to think and act differently. The content in these diverse writings, then, is challenging. The tenacious critique of conservatism, the unpacking of entrenched museum practices that are steeped in colonial thinking, places considerable demands on any reader who is open to reflecting on the tough questions that follow. At the same time, however, Bob's work is undeniably readable – accessible and generous (a style I have always envied since first reading the extraordinary prologue to *Museums in a Troubled World* [Janes 2009: 1–12], which remains in my mind as amongst the most memorable openings to any book).

That the writings included here have provoked fierce debate (and will continue to do so) is something of an understatement. As a thinker, writer and practitioner with an extraordinarily uncompromising and compelling – if sometimes disconcerting – vision for museums (how they should be run; their purposes and priorities; their obligations to communities, to society at large and to future generations; and their unique value), Bob is viewed by many as a source of inspiration and guidance in a collective effort to make museums more vital, relevant, ethical and socially purposeful organisations. At the same time, his persistent highlighting of the unethical implications that stem from museums' actions (and inaction) across the world (including an unquestioning adherence to market-led thinking; an unwillingness to acknowledge and respect the rights of Indigenous people and the pernicious effects of the *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*; the biases generated by undue corporate influence and poor governance; and the consequences of continued denial of climate change) has been a cause for consternation and discomfort for others. (Interestingly, I noted on a recent visit to Canada that whilst Janes' many supporters openly express their genuine admiration for his position in conference debates and acknowledge his considerable influence in publications, the minority who are uncomfortable with his insistence on accountability and self-reflection generally voice their discomfort privately.)

The opening remarks in his introduction to this volume hint at Bob's awareness that he has been viewed, at least by some, as unhelpfully pessimistic and critical of the field within which he has worked for many years. Indeed, his frustration with many aspects of orthodox museum thinking and his unrelenting critique of those who resist the notion that museums have an ethical responsibility to engage with both community needs and the broader challenges facing our planet can be plainly seen throughout the book. The writings included in this book, then, are undoubtedly provocative. The ideas and arguments that are threaded through them – which span nearly four decades of reflective practice – serve to unsettle and challenge their reader. Yet, it would be misleading to portray Bob Janes as a *provocateur* – as someone who deliberately courts controversy for its own sake. Indeed, those who know him well remark upon his modest, unassuming and collegial manner. Rather, this remarkable body of work is best characterised as a call to action, driven by the author's enduring optimism coupled with an unwavering belief in (and first-hand experience of) the unique capacity for museums to accomplish good work. Read the arguments presented here with care, question and interrogate the bold claims they make but, above all, consider how engaging with the difficult questions they pose might enrich your own understanding of the purposes of museums.

## Note

- 1 Richard Sandell is Professor of Museum Studies at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, United Kingdom. His recent books include *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (with Eithne Nightingale) and *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (with Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson). He has a deep concern for social justice and a belief that museums have a vital role to play in advancing equality for all.

## Reference

- Janes, R. R. (2009) *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* London and New York: Routledge.

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# PERMISSIONS

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